NEW FICTION
—IN—
VARIED FORMS

THE JUST STEWARD. By Richard Dehan. George H. Doran Company.

NO reader who remembers "One Braver Thing" and "Between Two Thieves" will deny that Richard Dehan is a writer of uncommon power, who can describe the grewsome actualities of war with a trenchant verity that justifies her choice of a masculine pseudonym. She sees life on a scale of epic magnitude. Had she been a painter, she would have given us huge, grim canvases of the Verestschagen school, carnivals of human butchery, unfathomed vistas of the dead and dying. At her best she gives us pages that stand out in high relief, haunting in their tragic tensity. Her one great weakness is that she does not know her own limitations; her vision is always broader than her power to achieve.

One feels this defect especially in "The Just Steward." Taken in its entirety it is so big, so many angled, so full of dim, remote vistas stretching backward through the vanished centuries that one finds it a story almost impossible to visualize as a symmetrical whole, and even more difficult to sum up with the brevity of a single purpose, as stories of epic scope should be summed up. In its narrowest sense this is a story of the world war, and more specifically with the fighting in Asia Minor, and the atrocities of the prison camp at Schechom, near Smyrna. The central story involves two men and a woman. Colonel Edward Yaill had long been engaged to Katharine Forbis; but he was gassed and shell shocked "somewhere north of Loos," and with all the memory of the past wiped from his mind, he was cajoled into marriage by a scheming, flighty, doll-faced nurse—and when we first meet him he is on the way home to break the news of his folly to "the finest woman God ever made." The other man, John Hazel, is a Jew who, curiously enough, has grown up in the business swirl of London without ever even guessing his Hebrew ancestry until, on the eve of his enlistment, his mother tells him that his father was a Syrian Jew and her own father was one Simonoff, from Moscow. Presently, as the war rolls on, word comes that one by one the Syrian brethren of John's father have been blotted out; that he is heir under his grandfather's will to vast possessions in Asia Minor, contingent only upon his openly accepting the Jewish faith. Moreover, there is a curious stewardship pased down from generation to generation, by which his family has been pledged to guard certain lands and vineyards in Palestine in trust for a certain Scotch family of which Katharine Forbis is now the direct descendant and heir. John Hazel and Colonel Yaill arrive simultaneously at Katharine's home, the one to make accounting of his stewardship, the other to confess his monumental folly and inflict an additional heartbreak upon the girl whose father lies dead, awaiting burial on the morrow. To add to her desolation her brother Julian, a Catholic priest serving with troops in the East, is either dead or a prisoner of the Turks.

John Hazel, having once looked upon Katharine, does not tell himself that he loves her. There are gulfs between them, of race, of religion, of social caste, that make such hopes unthinkable. But he does know that then and there he dedicates himself to her service for life. Since there is nothing either of these men can do for Katharine personally, they each decide independently to make their way to the East, seek for the missing brother, and, if he is living, effect his rescue.

The two independent quests of these men, each in native disguise after his own choosing, read like chapters from the Arabian Nights. There are some scenes of an almost uncanny realism, where you feel that the very soul of the Orient has been plucked out and laid bare before you. And then again the effect is that of seeing through a glass darkly; of watching dim, dissolving views in which you can only vaguely guess the full hideousness that is implied. To tell such a story in such a setting; to bring to full accomplishment the rescue of the man they sought at the cost of an agonizing martyrdom, would in itself constitute a story that should satisfy any reasonable ambition. But Richard Dehan has sought to do vastly more than this, and by so doing has come near missing her goal altogether.

She has tried to make this central story merely a thread to hold together the broader theme of Universal Redemption; or, in the words of the dedication, "that day when all faiths shall be merged in one f ith." There is a prologue laid in Alexandria in the Third Century, when the Jew Hazael, learning that his benefactor, the Roman Praetor, Fabius, has professed himself a Christian and will be put to death, binds himself and descendants to perpetual stewardship to guard the vineyards of Fabius and to bring up Fabius's son and his son's son as Christians. That Katharine Forbis might be a lineal descendant of the Praetor Fabius, and John Hazel, the last of the direct line of the House of Hazael is of course physically possible. But somehow the way in which the thing is done; the transparent artifice of a similarity of names; the introduction of mind reading, crystal balls, Oriental magic and prophetic visions, all seem out of key, and at times jar badly,

Continued on Following Page